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S. Mtn. Freeway already fast-tracked, officials say

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Some might wonder why the proposed South Mountain Freeway through Ahwatukee Foothills wasn't among the "fast track" roadway projects recently listed by the Maricopa Association of Governments.

Mystery over. Loop 202 - deemed vital to alleviating inner-city congestion on Interstate 10 and connecting the Valley's perimeter - can't be fast-tracked because its development already is speeding along the express lane, MAG officials say.

"It's really already fast-tracked," said Eric Anderson, transportation director for MAG. "The environmental impact statement is currently under way, and we're probably 12 months out on the EIS, maybe 18 months. And it may be longer, depending on what happens with the Gila River Indian Community."

The governing council of the reservation, just south and west of Ahwatukee Foothills, recently formed a transportation team to study the possibility of building the controversial freeway on tribal land, among other roadway projects.

But as it stands, freeway planners have identified a route that would swing westward from Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills and around South Mountain to link up to I-10 along 55th Avenue in the West Valley.

State transportation officials claim that many truckers would bypass downtown Phoenix if given that option, freeing up I-10 to mostly local traffic and leisure travelers.

All options to complete the loop as quickly as possible, but within the lengthy and legal process, are being explored, transportation officials said.

MAG voted to accelerate development of six other freeway projects. They include adding carpool lanes on the southern and northern segments of Loop 101, buying land for the planned Williams Gateway Freeway and adding one lane in each direction onto Interstate 17 at the northern reaches of the Valley.

The projects, plus three others in the West Valley, were pushed ahead by as many as 14 years.

Meanwhile, a threatened lawsuit by a group of freeway opponents likely won't delay

the proposed South Mountain Freeway unless the Arizona Department of Transportation botches a federally mandated environmental impact statement for the project.

"It's not uncommon" for opponents to file a lawsuit, Anderson said. "But I don't think in my memory we've had a (freeway) corridor challenged in court."

Opposition for opposition's sake often doesn't stop a freeway's development.

"When suits are filed, they often attempt to show that the process (for developing the EIS) was flawed in some way or the document itself was flawed," Anderson said. "But just because a community doesn't want it doesn't mean we don't build a freeway."

For its part, ADOT is taking its time preparing the EIS, a draft of which recently was pushed for completion to late summer instead of April.

"It (a lawsuit) is not something that we expect, but when we do our environmental studies, we do a very thorough evaluation to make sure it's legally defensible," ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said.

South Mountain Freeway opponents have long threatened to file a lawsuit against the project, but so far, there has been none filed.

But in September, a group calling itself Protecting Arizona Resources and Children Inc. formed a tax-exempt 501(c)3 corporation to collect donations to fight the freeway.

A final decision on whether to build the \$1.7 billion, 22-mile freeway isn't expected for several years. A so-called "record of decision" by the Federal Highway Administration is expected after ADOT finishes the final EIS.

The freeway would be paid for by a half-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2004.

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